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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000337

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BAPTISTS ENJOY A LIMITED SPHERE OF
FREEDOM; STILL FACE MANY OBSTACLES

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Baptist Church in Ashgabat operates out of its own property, although efforts to transfer title officially to the church continue to be thwarted. The church's leader noted continuing restrictions on proselytizing, obtaining religious literature, and conducting camps for children as examples of the failure of authorities to properly implement existing laws related to religion. Despite the difficulties, the congregation feels freedom within the walls of its church, no small feat given the obstacles it has overcome. END SUMMARY.

A CHURCH BUILDING OF THEIR OWN

¶2. (C) On March 12, Political Officer met with Pastor Vasiliy Korobov, the Chairman of the Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists of Turkmenistan. The meeting took place in the Baptists' church building located in an affluent residential neighborhood on the edge of Ashgabat. The facility was originally constructed to serve as a house, with a main building and a smaller, separate structure arranged around an enclosed courtyard. The room in which services are held is well-suited for its use, extending upwards to the roof of the two-story structure. Korobov explained that the previous owner of the property spent seven years building the house. When it was almost completed, but not yet occupied, he heard about government plans to raze the neighborhood, to be replaced by a stadium. The owner quickly sold to Pastor Korobov at a low price, failing to mention the threatened demolition. The purchase took place in 2005, and with former President Niyazov's death in 2006, the Government's plans changed and the neighborhood received a reprieve.

¶3. (C) Despite their use of the house as a dedicated church facility, the Baptists do not have authorization from the Government to own a building. The house was purchased and remains in Korobov's name. He has twice tried to donate the house to the Baptist Church, and Korobov explained that the law allows religious organizations to accept donations from any citizen. Nonetheless, the tax inspectorate, the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Ministry of Justice all require him to receive rent for the building from his church. Korobov pointed out that technically he is breaking the law because a private owner does not have the right to rent

property for use as a church, only as residential premises. He said the Government officials do not want to create a controversy so they "close their eyes" to the violation. The church would like its building to be designated as a "house of prayer" in order to be able to display a sign and obtain a telephone listing.

BAPTISTS: A LONG PRESENCE IN TURKMENISTAN

¶4. (C) By way of background, Korobov explained that Baptists have been present in Turkmenistan since 1908, although during the Soviet period, the church was not registered until 1984. At that time, they obtained legal status that allowed the church to be listed in the telephone directory. The church was re-registered by the newly-independent government in 1993, but lost registration in 1997 when a decree was passed that required religious organizations to have at least 500 members. Their church building was confiscated in 1997 and never returned. The church also has branches in Mary, Turkmenbashi and Balkanabat. Korobov said these groups are able to meet without problem at their church facilities, but if they go out to proselytize or hold a worship service in a home and invite neighbors, officials arrive and interfere. As an example, Korobov described a trip by 12 church members, including himself, to Kerki in southern Lebap Province, near the border with Afghanistan. They went in order to hold a meeting in someone's home. Upon arrival, they were soon joined by 13 officials from the police, security service, the local CRA, the mayor's office and a local mufti. The officials peppered them with questions about who they were

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and what they were doing there for the entire afternoon, purposely making it impossible to conduct a service, according to Korobov.

NO BOOKS, KIDS' CAMPS OR PROSELYTIZING

¶5. (C) Religious literature is also hard for the Baptists to obtain. The CRA has refused the church permission to import bibles. Korobov showed Political Officer the church's "library" - a wall of empty bookshelves. In the past, Government officials have seized their books, so they no longer leave them out in the open. According to Korobov, a fire inspector, who by law has an unrestricted right to enter premises and conduct inspections, arrived at the church, accompanied by five other officials. The accompanying officials looked around for non-fire related things about which to complain, such as the reading material or the use of a printer.

¶6. (C) The church also conducted a five-day "camp" for street kids at the church. Korobov said the kids stayed at the church and were taught about hygiene, played games, and had religious lessons. After the camp concluded, Deputy CRA Chairman Gurbanov called Korobov in and said that, because of the unauthorized camp, the church would receive its first reprimand. Three reprimands would result in revocation of the church's registration. According to Korobov, Gurbanov that the church should have submitted a letter requesting approval for the camp in advance. Now, however, the CRA would not accept a letter, and Gurbanov reportedly said that the Baptists did not have the legal right to hold such camps.

¶7. (C) Korobov said that the various laws relating to religion are good on paper, but that their rights are not respected in practice. He noted that proselytizing on the street, handing out religious literature, and conducting activities such as children's camp should all be allowed according to the law. He said the church has a long history in the country and is always open for everyone to come and observe its activities. Authorities should take that into account, rather than dealing with the Baptists in the same way as they might religious extremists. In his view, the authorities have allowed progress on religious freedom

begrudgingly, not sincerely, in response to pressure from foreign governments and international organizations. Korobov said the congregation feels freedom within the walls of its church, but not when they try to meet elsewhere.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: As the situation of the Baptists shows, registration is not the holy grail. Although registration allows groups to meet together without breaking the law, they still face seemingly countless obstacles to freely carrying out their activities, with the constant risk of running afoul of the law. At the same time, the Baptists have managed to carve out for themselves a place where they feel free, no small feat considering the obstacles they've encountered.

END COMMENT.

MILES